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Features and Prospects of Resolving the Political Crisis in Venezuela

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Abstract---The purpose of the research is to identify opportunities and prospects for resolving the political crisis in Venezuela proceeding from the current situation in the country. The specifics of the crisis processes in the socio-economic and political spheres, as well as the causes contributing to their deepening are considered. The authors analyze the conflict between the ruling regime and the opposition and the factors impeding the implementation of the political and economic measures pursued by the government to remove the country from the crisis. The authors research the actions performed by the authorities of the Chavist regime in promoting dialogue and seeking compromise both with the political opposition and other immediate parties to the conflict, including secret negotiations, and with the help of mediators. Particular attention is paid to the scenarios of crisis resolution in Venezuela developed by the author of the paper, named "negative", "positive", and "neutral". Each of the scenarios traces the actions of the main opposing forces, their capabilities to resolve the conflict in one or another direction, the involvement of regional and major world states and the possibilities of their implementation to date.

Keywords---conflict resolution, dialogue formats, opposition, political crisis, ruling regime, crisis resolution, Venezuela.

Introduction

To date, the situation in Venezuela remains quite complex and unpredictable regarding further developments in the country and the confrontation between various political forces. The government headed by N. Maduro's undertakes socio-

economic measures to stabilize the situation, but they do not bring the proper effect and do not contribute to the beginning of the process for removing the country from the systemic crisis (Buxton, 2020). For example, according to data cited in various studies, the number of people living below the poverty line in 2018 was 87% and the shortage of medicines was over 85% at the beginning of 2019 (Shinkarenko, 2020). In addition, as the crisis deepens, people's access to education, health care and social security, the development of which has provided the ruling regime with a broad base of support among the poor people, is being impeded. The situation in education is extremely unfavourable. According to A.V. Boreyko, "at the beginning of 2019, about 60% of schoolchildren were unable to attend classes and, due to the general decline in living standards, are forced to engage in a constant search for sources of income" (Shinkarenko, 2020). In general, the state's lack of necessary financial resources hinders the implementation of many formally functioning social programmes (de Rodriguez et al., 2004; Diaz et al., 1999).

Despite the significant reduction in the level of protest activity in the streets of Venezuela, the government of N. Maduro is currently in an extremely difficult situation, which makes it look for new ways out of the situation and the possibility of retaining power in its hands (Nelson et al., 2018). These circumstances push the president and his supporters to establish a dialogue with the opposition, as evidenced not only by the negotiations undertaken by the authorities in international forums, but also by the contacts within the country with the representatives of moderate political forces. Secret negotiations of N. Maduro's regime with the opposition, taking place "behind the backs of Russian allies", are ambiguous. The latter events have many factors as their reasons: a significant drop in oil prices in the pandemic situation in the world; continuing policy of sanction pressure from the U.S.; the reduction of financial support from Russia and China; the narrowing social base of the regime, etc. The results of these negotiations are not known to the academic community, but the fact that the ruling regime is becoming increasingly vulnerable seems an obvious fact (de Fortuny et al., 2012; Omar et al., 2017).

Method

The issues raised in the paper are particularly relevant when considering the current state of the conflict between the government and the opposition and, in particular, the possibilities of dialogue between them in order to resolve the political situation in the country. As far as the research is concerned, there is a lack of attention in domestic and foreign scholarship to the ways and prospects of resolving the systemic crisis in Venezuela, as well as to the role of individual states in resolving it. These urgent problems prompted the authors of this paper to investigate them (Sweere et al., 1987; Preston & Epley, 2009).

The methodology used in this paper is the systemic approach and the method of predictive scenarios. The systemic approach allowed for executing a comprehensive analysis devoted to the peculiarities of the political crisis development in Venezuela, its impact on spheres of public life and the resolution of contradictions between the authorities and the opposition. This methodology facilitated the identification of possibilities for resolving the crisis processes in the

state under conditions of political polarization of society and the impact of regional and extra-regional forces on it. Application of the forecast scenarios method helped to build three options of political crisis resolution in the country, named "negative", "positive", and "neutral". Each scenario considers actions of the parties to the conflict depending on development of the situation in one or another direction, the role of regional (Latin American) and large (Russia, the USA, China) states, as well as possibilities for implementation of these options at the modern stage of Venezuela's development (Li & Tang, 2007; Roe & Stallman, 1994).

Results and Discussion

The deterioration of the humanitarian situation, the decline in energy production due to low investment in the oil and gas sector, and inefficient management of the state company PDVSA increase the polarisation of political forces in the country Handlin (2017), and contribute to a power vacuum. There is a growing lack of unity both in the ranks of the opposition and of the ruling regime. The strengthening of ideological and political contradictions within the opposition represented by more than two dozen parties, as well as the lack of resources and opportunities to continue the struggle have led to the significant demoralization of the opposition bloc MUD, which is actually on the verge of disintegration. According to researcher Z.V. Ivanovsky, "there are also noticeable divisions in the PSUV ranks: some prominent political figures have emigrated, many do not see the need to reform the current constitution adopted on the initiative and under the leadership of Chávez; the high-profile corruption scandals and high-profile resignations have political connotations" (Shinkarenko, 2020).

In this regard, the ruling party is using all possible efforts to prevent further uniting of opposition forces and holding early elections, in which N. Maduro or his successor may not win. If the opposition in its actions against the ruling regime relies mainly on financial and political assistance from other states, the Venezuelan government relies on the extensive state apparatus and law enforcement agencies, which are a powerful factor in stabilising the political situation (Azzellini, 2019). Meanwhile, the use of administrative resources and economic leverage does not bring as tangible results as it did in the early stages of the political crisis. Therefore, the assistance of major states such as Russia, China, India and Turkey, interested in the Latin American state as an important supplier of energy resources, to Venezuela is seen as significant (Pankova & Kuzmina, 2020). However, the existing contradictions between the government and the opposition fuelled by external players clearly do not work for the benefit of the society itself, which, first of all, should be realized by the conflicting parties themselves (Styron & Janoff-Bulman, 1997; Kerachian & Karamouz, 2007).

According to the authors of the paper, three scenarios for the crisis resolution are possible within the context of the existing dual power in Venezuela. All of them are given below in the order depending of Russia's national interests. In this respect, the first scenario can be called "negative"; this implies a sharp deterioration of the situation in the country and, above all, in the socio-economic sphere, being close to humanitarian catastrophe. At the same time, international economic sanctions from the U.S., the EU, and some Latin American countries

are tightening. The Venezuelan government finds itself constrained in its actions, lacking effective political and economic leverage to influence the situation in the country, which in turn leads to the consolidation of opposition forces and a split in the ruling elite. The level of support for the president by the population falls to 5-10% and the despair of the situation encourages the military to side with the opposition and demands that Maduro resign. The development of such a scenario is possible with a fairly neutral position of Russia and China, which are gradually reducing the level of support for the Venezuelan regime from the financial and political point of view (Moreira & Montes, 2021; Zun, 2020).

The second scenario - "positive" - envisages a gradual, albeit slow, recovery of the country's social sphere and economy through the relative diversification of the latter and the development of production, which would attract additional investment from a number of foreign partners. The strengthening of the regime will contribute to the greater demoralisation of the opposition, the flight of some of its members from the country, and the support of most parties for the policies of the authorities. This situation will inevitably lead to the launch of a national dialogue process, in which the ruling regime may make some concessions to the opposition (for example, transferring some powers from the president to the parliament), but while maintaining its ideological orientation and principles of building a socialist state. Despite the consolidation of power and the broadening of the social support base for the regime, its stability will depend on a number of internal and external factors in the development of the country. The first is the implementation of major economic reforms, which have not yield any meaningful results yet and the second is the influence of regional and extra-regional states on the political crisis (Schelkunov et al., 2021; Widana et al., 2020).

The "positive" scenario, in the opinion of the authors of the work, can be implemented only with significant financial and political assistance to Venezuela from Russia, China, Latin American states (Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay) and regional organisations (such as ALBA) that support N. Maduro's regime. At the same time, the number of countries taking a neutral stance may increase. The actions of the United States and its European allies in the "positive" scenario could follow two directions. The first involves further "strangulation" of the regime through the policy of sanctions and various tools of political pressure, but they will not be able to seriously change the situation in favour of the opposition. The second direction suggests a gradual weakening of interest in Venezuela due to the loss of allies in the form of major opposition parties, inefficiency of spent resources, fear of escalating the crisis into a civil war and fatigue from the long-standing conflict. At the same time, it is problematic to say that the US will withdraw completely from Venezuela in the foreseeable future (Tauhid et al., 2020; Sibomana, 2018).

The third scenario is called "neutral". This scenario is based on the fact that as the socio-economic situation worsens, the Venezuelan authorities will be forced to hold early presidential elections. At the same time, elections will be held for the National Assembly as a counter-measure by the opposition, which currently constitutes the majority in the country's parliament. Both electoral campaigns must be carried out under the strict supervision of international observers and in accordance with the Venezuelan legislation in force. In parallel, the National

Constituent Assembly, which has de facto taken over the role of legislative body, is dissolved. The results of the elections are recognised by regional and major world states (the USA, Russia, China, etc.), irrespective of the fact, who wins the elections. These countries then act as guarantors of post-crisis recovery and provide material and other assistance to stabilize the political situation in the country and economic recovery.

The results of the elections themselves may prove to be highly controversial. Based on the current situation in the country, opposition candidates stand a good chance of winning. However, given the presence of centre-left forces in the opposition, the new president who comes to power will not necessarily be a centre- or right-of-centre supporter. One of the most important tasks will be to avoid a violent scenario if one of the parties disagrees with the election results. Under the new circumstances, the United States and its Western allies are essentially achieving their objective of holding free and fair elections. For Russia and China, the implementation of a "neutral" scenario could be beneficial in the event that Venezuela achieves non-aligned status and pursues a multi-vector policy in which the two countries retain their economic and political interests. The proposed scenarios for the resolution of the political crisis in Venezuela are certain types of analytical construction for the situation based on the development of political and economic processes in the country. For Russia, the best scenario would be a "positive" one in which it would strengthen its geopolitical position and essentially become a hegemonic state in this republic. Given its limited financial resources, Russia could also be satisfied with a "neutral" resolution of the crisis, which would require it to reconcile its interests with those of other countries.

Summary

Thus, the resolution of the political crisis in Venezuela depends on internal and external factors that have a significant impact on the socio-economic environment and the positions of the opposing parties to the conflict. The stalemate is the alternative in which various segments of the population supporting both the ruling regime and the opposition are experiencing the consequences of a severe humanitarian crisis, with around 5,000 people emigrating from the country every day (Bissio, 2018). The measures proposed by the government to end the crisis have not brought any significant results, and the opposition forces, in their turn, are reluctant to negotiate, exploiting any lapses in the policy of the authorities in their own interests (Hausmann & Rodriguez, 2011). The constructive way to resolve the political crisis in Venezuela is to build a dialogue between the immediate parties to the conflict without relying on external forces, starting from less significant issues and moving on to the resolution of more important contradictions. Much will depend on how the parties to the conflict themselves are able to agree on settling their differences, reaching compromises and making concessions. The political will and desire of the parties to achieve this outcome, and the understanding that their joint efforts should work for the good of the society, rather than to gain unilateral advantage, to gain power or to retain it, will be important here.

Conclusion

At present, the confrontation between political actors over the Venezuelan crisis is observed not only at the domestic, but also at the international level. First and foremost, there is the ongoing US sanctions pressure on the Venezuelan authorities, who are trying to push through a scenario of resolving the crisis through an early presidential election. At the same time, the Americans are using all the legal-political ways in order to oust the incumbent president of the country, from freezing the state assets abroad and transferring them to the opposition led by J. Guaido Manoilo & Strigunov (2020), to accusing the authorities in the abuse of power and drug trafficking (Rashbaum et al., 2020).

In the foreseeable future, all three of these scenarios of political crisis resolution in Venezuela are possible. The "neutral" scenario is the most optimal in terms of political stability, elimination of dual power and recovery of the country from the social and economic crisis. This scenario is possible in case of a considerable weakening of the US position in the country and strengthening of the influence of other states, especially Russia and China. In addition, Russia should be able to exert sufficient influence on the Venezuelan authorities to hold a pre-term election of the head of state. Russia is not interested in that at the moment, but it may take that step if its own economy is weakening and its resources are insufficient to support the Chavez regime. For the Venezuelan authorities, an election can only be realistic if the socio-economic situation in the country deteriorates and the regime itself is threatened.

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